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Chapter Twenty: Solo II

I don't think I could have survived alone. Not for much longer, at least.

I never used to dwell on this. Not when all I could think about was how I would take down the next person I encountered.

How many…?

…

I need… I need a drink…

…

How many Angeliques have I killed out there?

Because I have murdered women. More than once. Not out of pleasure, not by my own choice… I think. But I did it, in the end. Even if most of them held a weapon in their hands, that doesn't erase the sin committed. Sometimes I think about it. Sometimes, I do it on purpose, as if I were trying to torture myself.

I think about… Angelique pulling the trigger when I do. That girl could die at any moment—before me or after. And what if the women I killed carried stories just like hers? What if I took the life of an Angelique out there, one that another Alez was trying to protect?

What would become of me if that were the case?

How do I move forward...? How do I keep going alone after remembering the

warmth that another human being can provide? What reason would I have to take another step? How many stories just like mine have I brought to an end?

I know it sounds insolent. I know I have no right to complain, being the one who survived while so many others didn't. But I can't help it. I never chose this life.

I don't know where I would be today if the war had never started. Maybe at home, helping my mother. Or working alongside my father. And Angelique... Angelique would be in school, preparing for great things. That girl is brilliant, and so capable.

…

It infuriates me to think about how different things could have been. When I stop to reflect, I realize I have almost no good memories from before I met her. Everything I lived through after being separated from Zara and until I saw Angelique for the first time is nothing but a dark, opaque stain. Time itself blurs as I try to undo it, and it spreads so much—so,

so much—that it ends up staining that girl and everything around her.

We should have never met. Not just because of the circumstances that led to it, but because the world should never have twisted so violently as to make such a meeting even possible. Today, all I can do is curse.

I curse this present for having led me to Angelique.

But… even so…

If I had never met her…

If I had never met Angelique…

April, 2031

When I entered the room—my room—Angelique was sitting on the bed, a book resting in her hands.

On the nightstand, a candle flickered softly.

"Can't sleep?"

"That's not it. I just never heard your

door close, so I figured you were still awake."

"You're telling me you can hear these hinges creak when your room is all the way across the house?"

"Yes. You can't?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I sat on the opposite side of the bed, eyes lost somewhere on the floor.

"I read..."

"Read what?"

"I read that staying up this late is not healthy, Alez. Can you do something about your sleeping habits?"

"Not likely. I'm a creature of habit. I can't change that just like that."

"What do you even do until so late? If my calculations are right... I usually fall asleep an hour or two before you. Every day."

"I look out the window, check entry routes A and B, inspect our weapons…

there are things to do. It keeps me occupied."

"You could do all that in the morning."

"Yeah... I could. But then I'd have nothing to do at night."

She lowered her book, giving me a look that at first seemed empty, but that I could easily read as confusion.

"I don't stay up because I need to do those things. I do those things because I stay up."

Satisfied with the answer, though not with its meaning, she turned her gaze back to the pages. I glanced at whatever she was reading, and my eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"That's German."

"Yes."

"You don't know how to read German."

She frowned slightly and shot me a sideways glance, the kind that silently begs someone to stop talking.

"I'm trying to learn."

"But, Angel..."

She buried her eyes in the book once more, a desperate attempt to silence me through sheer determination. Her stubbornness amused me.

Competitive and proud. She hates being left behind, and since I'm the only person she interacts with daily, I guess she feels the need to prove me how capable she is. I could tell her that I already know she has the potential to surpass me in absolutely everything, but I don't want to lose either. Besides, this is more fun.

"... I can help you."

"I found a book in the library. It's in English. A beginner's guide to learning German, so I shouldn't have trouble

teaching myself."

"Really? And what are you going to do about pronunciation?"

"..."

I had said exactly what I shouldn't have, and in return, I got a clear look of irritation. Angelique's pupils screamed that my question had offended her. She was probably about to say something like *I'll manage,* but she knew that wouldn't be a viable excuse. Before she could dig herself into a deeper hole, I tried offering a reassuring smile.

"Let me help. I promise I won't get in the way too much."

Weighing her options, she must have realized that the best outcome she could get from this exchange was a partial victory: she would allow me to help so she could catch up faster.

"You picked a strange book to start with.

I'm sure there are easier ones in the library."

"What's wrong with this one?"

"Nothing, it's just..."

I shifted a little closer, just enough to be at her side and read along.

"Don't take it the wrong way, but you should start with a children's book. When... when I wanted to learn French, they gave me stories for kids. They're much easier to read, and they use shorter words."

"Was that in Amere?"

"Yeah, the people I met there."

"How many languages do you speak, Alez?"

"Saying I speak them would be giving myself too much credit. I'd say I can understand... five. German, English, French, Italian, and a bit of Hungarian. I studied some others in school, but I barely remember them."

"Did you learn all that in Amere?"

"No, just French. I learned Hungarian from some relatives, English in school and in the military, French in Amere, and Italian... just from wandering around. I didn't have much of a choice."

This time, it was her turn to raise an eyebrow. I wasn't sure what was going through her mind, but she eventually returned her gaze to the book and murmured:

"You're smarter than you think, Alez."

The chuckle that escaped me didn't even make her blink. I leaned in a little more, deciding to push my luck.

"Give me that book."

"Huh? Why?"

"Just hand it over. I want to try something."

Not without a slight pout, she placed the open book in my hands, waiting to see what had crossed my mind.

Closing it to make my intentions clear—I was starting from the beginning—I spread my legs slightly. She understood the message, shifting between them and resting the back of her head against my chest. Then, I opened the book again, ready to spend the rest of the night reading that story to her.

"Let's see... The Song of the Nibelungs. I know this one..."

. . .

September, 2023

If that had really been an established commune, they would have shot me on the spot. That didn't happen, luckily, though the looks I got almost made me wish a shootout would break out.

I didn't really know how far south in

Italy I was, but I was near the sea. I was walking down a narrow street, strangely busy. It almost felt like a communal area, where all kinds of survivors gathered in an attempt to help each other. People hurried back and forth, and no one stopped to worry about a stranger or an unfamiliar face. I saw men trading food for weapons, children trading weapons for clothes, and women trading their bodies for shelter.

I saw in the face of a beast the desire to tear my intestines apart when the artificial light reflected in its pupils.

That mother shielded her little daughter behind her as she saw me pass by with the rifle in my hands. If I had truly wanted to attack her, what could she have done? Instinctive behavior is… incredible, really.

I slung the weapon over my back and tried to act as if the sight hadn't affected me. I wasn't there to cause fear or create conflict. My intention was the same as always: to find food, water, and, with some luck, a temporary shelter. I had faith that a place like this would be, as far as one could

expect, safe to rest in. That small city was intact, and it probably hadn't been a victim of large-scale battles, much less bombings. It was true that there was no sign of military or security forces, but I also didn't see any patrols that would make me think Amere had taken control.

"... lack of time. How long do we have to wait?"

"A couple of weeks. A month at worst."

"That's still too long. There's no resistance left, what's taking them so long?"

"Lack of personnel."

"I won't believe you if you tell me they're short on people."

"Not short on people, but short on free hands. Not so much in the south, but in northern Italy, they're still up to their necks. Same in Austria. It's a tough terrain, and almost the entire military corps escaping from Spain ends up in their ranks, so it doesn't feel like their defenses are falling. Tough sons of bitches."

I stopped as I reached the entrance to another alleyway.

I heard two voices speaking in English. It wasn't as fluent as that of a native speaker, but it was clear enough for me to understand, even just in passing. I leaned my back against the wall and, as discreetly as my expressionless face allowed, I set myself to eavesdrop on those two men talking.

"What are our orders?"

"Keep waiting."

"Bullshit…"

"Yeah, bullshit. I tried…"

"Tried what?"

"I tried telling them we're trying to stop the rain with our bare hands, but it was no use. Sirius keeps saying we have to maintain order with the little we have."

"He's a fucking idiot. Man, every day, dozens of people arrive, and plenty of them are armed."

"You think I don't know that? The situation is unsustainable, and if it hasn't blown up yet, it's only because the newcomers are timid."

"They're not timid, they just get intimidated by the crowd."

"That's the same thing."

"It's not the same. It's just a matter of time before a group of brave, armed men show up, realize there's no real structure keeping order, and decide to take the town for themselves."

"That's out of my hands."

"I know, but…"

At first glance, none of that information

was useful to me on a personal level, though I couldn't stop thinking that one day, it might be. Amere was struggling to take over a remote Italian town, and the only reason was how naturally people sought to stick together. While it was true that nothing officially kept those people united, it wasn't far-fetched to think they would quickly band together against any force trying to subjugate them.

"What if we try to recruit new members right here? Some of them have… pretty lifeless looks. I don't think it'd be too hard to convince them."

"And then you'll be the one to explain to Ahri that we started a recruitment mission on our own. I've seen what they do to those who make up orders, and I have no intention of losing an eye or an ear."

"Ah…"

"What's wrong?"

"Alright, we won't do anything. I'll follow orders… as long as they bring good results."

"… Those are dangerous words, brother."

"You gonna report me?"

"No, but walls have ears."

I stepped away from the wall as soon as I heard that sentence. Not because I thought they were talking about me, but because I was sure I wouldn't be interested in anything they said after that. That information was enough.

The city was a safe place to stop and rest. I'd probably run into bandits or looters, but I wouldn't have Amere's patrols harassing me. If I could stay there, just for a couple of days…

"Hey, kid! Kid! Traveller!"

A house like any other on the side of the street. Right by the door, a man, maybe forty-five years old, waved at me, beckoning me closer. He had short, graying hair, and although he looked noticeably tired, he wore the smile of a

used car salesman.

"Looking for a place to sleep? We've got a room available here!"

I weighed my options. Plenty of people were walking through that street, yet this guy had focused solely on me. Meeting his gaze and not taking my eyes off him, I crossed the street to approach him, only to notice his smile growing even brighter.

The house was… fine. Nothing special, but intact. It had a small front yard protected by low stainless steel bars and a clean red brick exterior.

"Why me?"

"Huh? Did I say something that bothered you?"

"No. But…"

"You look tired."

The man lowered his voice a little, placing his hands on his hips.

"Almost everyone you see walking around here are city residents. And those who aren't… well, they don't exactly inspire confidence. You're different. You look like a good guy. In fact…"

"What?"

"You look like a soldier. Not your clothes, of course, but those eyes speak for themselves."

He let out a deep, carefree laugh. His broad cheeks flushed easily.

"We don't ask for much, if that's what worries you."

"I never said I was looking for a place to stay."

"Well, it won't be long before night falls. Tell me, do you have somewhere to sleep?"

"…"

"That's what I thought."

It was funny—something about his

innocent blue eyes took away my desire to punch him.

Though he told me, I don't remember his name.

"Food, ammunition, a weapon… whatever you can offer will be welcome."

"I have… I have 9x19 ammo. That's all I can give you."

"Hm… how about ten bullets for a night's stay? Breakfast included."

"Only ten rounds? That's… extremely generous. Suspiciously so."

"We have no electricity, no gas, and the water pressure is minimal. We're also not the only ones offering shelter around here, so we can't charge too much."

It was convincing. I still felt like there was something important he wasn't telling me, but searching for an empty house on my own was probably a worse idea. It wouldn't be surprising if all the houses in the area were just traps to catch travelers.

In places like that… you really can't trust anyone.

Or maybe… is that just me?

"Alright. I'll stay for just one night."

"Excellent! Come inside, I'll take you to your room."

The inside of the house was… empty. There wasn't a single bullet hole in the walls, but there was hardly any furniture either, and the room that guy led me to shared the same emptiness. There was only a bed and a table, nothing else, in that three-by-five-meter room whose only exits were the door leading to the house's main hallway and a window overlooking a very, very neglected backyard that connected with the rest of the houses on the block.

I walked over to the table and set my backpack on it. At no point did I turn my back on my host. I searched one of the pockets and counted exactly ten rounds for my pistol.

"FMJ?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"On the contrary, they're perfect."

The guy took the bullets with both hands before slipping them into a pocket.

"One last thing: try to leave your room as little as possible. Everyone here is a stranger, so we can't guarantee that the other guests won't be… hmm… let's say, not very well-intentioned. Though, I suppose I didn't really need to clarify that."

The last time I saw that man was when he walked out the door. I silently stepped forward and, trying not to make a sound, locked the entrance. Then I moved the table to block it as an extra security measure.

I sat on the floor, my backpack at my side, and leaned my back against the bed. From inside my pack, I pulled out a can of tuna, which I opened with my knife, along

with some crackers that had long since gone stale and soggy.

"I have to leave as soon as dawn breaks. It's not safe. I have to avoid places this crowded…"

The food tasted awful, but it did its job. I never liked canned goods or preserved foods.

I looked out the window as I ate. From such angle, I couldn't even see the yard, but watching the sky as night fell was the only way to pass the time. The moon was already visible, nearly full.

I tossed the can aside and fell into silence.

Silence…

That awful silence.

I thought about the conversation between those two Amere members. Austria was still fighting, and from the looks of it, it wasn't going to fall anytime soon. That was a relief, I suppose. But it

was strange. It comforted me to think that my friends and family still had hope, yet at the same time, all of it already felt foreign to me. I was no longer part of the same world they lived in. I was someone without a homeland or leaders. No friends, no family. A wandering entity on streets as dead as itself, spreading more death in order to avoid it.

Hundreds of paths opened before me. Not just literal ones, but figurative ones too. Nothing was stopping me from settling in a city like this, trying to form a group to defend ourselves from external attacks and holding out until the war ended—building a community. Nothing was stopping me from becoming a bandit, indulging in whatever luxuries I could at the expense of others—no one could stop me.

My fate was something else. My fate was born purely from my own indecision, from my lack of convictions.

"I should sleep, at least for a while…"

I didn't bother lying on the bed. In that same position, I closed my eyes and rested a hand over the pistol on my hip.

Back then, I had a habit to help me sleep in peace. I thought about my parents, about David, about Zara, about the days of peace… If I forced myself to think of nothing else, sometimes, with a little luck, I could drift off without my sleep being stolen by nightmares.

Little by little.

Second by second.

I got lost in the intangible voices of those I never wanted to forget.

. . .

The first shot woke me up, followed by a few explosions and some distant screams. I sprang from the floor and grabbed my pistol with my right hand. I aimed at the door, fighting off the dizziness that comes naturally right after waking up, and slowly raised my backpack with my left hand

before slinging it over my shoulder.

It was still dark, the light scarce. I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision. No more than four hours had passed, and dawn was still far off. Shots of various kinds and calibers echoed within the house. The barrel of my 92 aligned perfectly with the top third of the door, and I braced myself for an assault at any moment. Whoever attacked this house must have been after me. Of course, there was no other explanation. Surely, they were hunting me.

In retrospect, I can admit that this thought was weak and unfounded, but it was the only thing that came to mind in that instant.

Three consecutive knocks came at the door, almost making me open fire to take down whoever was trying to enter my room. I heard a voice. It was the owner of the place, to whom I had given the ten pistol rounds.

"WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! DON'T

COME OUT FOR ANYTHING!"

I didn't respond, simply because I didn't know what to say. I'm not sure whether the man left or was struck down by the relentless, directionless gunfire, but I never heard his voice again.

It felt bitter. Now, I'm almost certain that man died right there. I had mistrusted him until the very end, and if anyone was going to try to harm me, it was him.

Knowing I had a bit more time, I holstered my pistol and grabbed the rifle on my back. I heard footsteps on the other side, moving back and forth, though not trying to enter my room. But... there were many footsteps. From an open position, I might have been able to fight them off, but being confined in this room, I was just waiting to be killed as well. I assessed my options. Turning around, I saw the window. There was no one in the yard; not even the neighbors had come out to see what was going on. The answer was clear.

I swallowed and gripped my rifle by the

barrel and top. With one sharp blow, I smashed the window with the stock, then shattered as many of the remaining shards as I could from the frame. Once the hole was large enough, I leaned out of the window to assess the state of the outside. Indeed, there was no one. The fight was entirely taking place inside the house. The grass outside, along with those trees towering above the roof, had grown wild and untreated. A wall separated me from the next house, a wall I could jump without much effort.

It wasn't productive for this to give me a brief sense of calm, because as I focused and moved out of that heightened state of alert, I noticed the rapid pace of my heartbeat. I was agitated. Sweating and biting my lips. I was scared.

I kept breaking the glass to avoid any cuts that might hinder me later, when someone knocked at my door again. I twisted my upper body to glance in that direction. I waited, truly waiting, to hear that man's voice again, the one I had judged wrongly from the start, but it was a

stranger's voice that took over the air around me.

"This door is locked! There's someone inside!"

They were coming for me.

I felt my lips dry almost instantly, as though someone had dumped a bucket of beach sand on me.

Without a second thought, I leapt through the window, using my arms and weapon as a shield to protect myself from the remaining shards of glass that could have sliced my head or face.

I landed on the other side, surrounded by those last fragments of the window. No more than a second later, I felt something warm on my forehead, but I didn't have time to check what it was. The unmistakable sound of a shotgun made my chest tighten.

"Shit..."

I turned over to lie on my back and waited, but they didn't even give me time for that.

"The window! Look through the window!"

I fired.

I couldn't see anyone within range, but I fired anyway.

Fighting gravity to get back on my feet, I shot at the ceiling inside the room, then at every section of wall I could see. As long as I kept shooting, they wouldn't peek. That was my only chance of getting away; I had to reach the wall.

Their shouts and insults reached my ears, but they were drowned out by the fire coming from my 805.

After every two difficult steps, I fired a bullet in the direction of the window. I thought I was keeping track of the ammunition properly. This way, I could

reach my goal with relative safety, and once I had a moment to think calmly, I could decide which direction to take.

Click.

No bullet left the barrel of my rifle. Without stopping to check if I had run out of ammo or if the gun had malfunctioned, I pulled out my pistol and fired in the same manner. A few steps later, my back hit the wall.

That moment of vulnerability would be inevitable. To jump over the wall, I would need both hands, and those few seconds would be the perfect opportunity for my enemies to rip me apart.

I took a breath, bit my tongue, and turned around as fast as I could to grip the edge of the wall. As I climbed, I heard a shout. I drew strength from nowhere and pulled myself up. Only once my body was fully across the brick did I hear a gunshot, and from the shock, I dropped backwards to the ground on the other side. A burst of shots hit the wall. I could feel...

Each bullet, individually, hit with its full

violence. Beyond the noise of the explosion or the lead fragments breaking the sound barrier, the proximity to the wall allowed me to perceive with perfect clarity how the projectiles slammed into it.

I stood up with my heart in my throat and my 92 raised. A sharp pain in my back forced me to bend slightly to bear it while taking steps backward.

"... they won't follow me."

It wouldn't do them any good. Worse still, they were at a disadvantage in terrain that favored me. I convinced myself with that thought and looked around. It was the rocky yard of another house. Fortunately, it appeared neglected and ignored. I spotted the door that would lead me inside and wasted no time approaching. It was closed, but two kicks were enough to make the weak wood give way and snap. Inside, with a lit candle in her hand, was a woman.

My first instinct was to point my pistol

at her.

"Aspetta! Nun sparari!"

I examined her features.

She was a thin woman, very thin, in her mid-thirties, with long blonde hair and a weathered face, probably from inadequate nutrition. While one hand held the candle, the other rested over her chest. She wasn't armed. Still, I didn't let my guard down; I didn't lower my weapon.

Only...

It was only when I felt something enter my right eye, forcing me to close it, that I shifted the weapon slightly to align the sights with my left eye and quietly winced. I felt two distinct burns: one from the cut on my forehead, the other from the blood that had gotten into my eye.

"Back against the wall"

"Espera, ppi favuri"

"Back against the wall!"

I made a gesture to reinforce my command, and the woman nodded slowly before retreating until her back was pressed against one of the white walls inside.

It was a nearly untouched living room, one that hadn't seen any combat yet. Keeping the weapon trained on her, I scanned the room for the closest piece of furniture. It was a plain wooden cupboard. I opened the doors one by one and began rifling through the contents, throwing glasses and glass ornaments onto the floor, where they shattered upon hitting the tiles. I was looking, but I couldn't find anything —a clean rag, anything—to wipe my face.

The woman started to sob, and within seconds, the sobbing turned into full-blown crying. Yet, she never let go of the candle—the only source of light in the dark room.

"Shit!"

She screamed at my frustrated shout. I bit my lip, forcing myself to focus back on her.

"Medkit."

"N-nun capisciu-".

"A medkit! Something to treat my wounds!"

Desperation slowly overtook the woman's face, her features illuminated by the yellowish glow of the flame in her hand.

I pointed at my my face with my free hand as I took strides toward her, pushing her further and further back against the wall.

"BLOOD! A CUT! I NEED TO TREAT IT!"

She swallowed so hard I could see it in the dim light, nodding vigorously like a scolded child.

"¡C-corta!".

Her eyes widened when she understood my request, and she pointed toward a door down the hallway that emerged from one of the walls of the living room. I signaled with my pistol for her to go ahead, and she offered no resistance.

Shots and explosions echoed in the distance, but they no longer concerned me.

I could see a bathroom on the other side of the door. Once inside, she opened the mirror above the sink from the center and took two steps to the side while pointing inside, muttering words I couldn't remember. Her face was almost entirely drenched in tears, and the way the flame of the candle flickered made me think she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I entered the bathroom behind her and closed the door. She shut her eyes and let more silent tears escape.

"A first aid kit, alright..."

I glanced around the claustrophobic bathroom. There wasn't even a window for light on any of the walls. The sink with its mirror, a toilet, and on the other side, a bathtub. Everything looked old.

"Get in the bathtub."

I said, and knowing she wouldn't understand me just through words, I indicated the tub with the barrel of my pistol. With clear resignation, she complied and, without being told, sat down in a corner, hugging her legs after setting the candle aside. I saw her finally exhale all the air she had been holding in her lungs when I lowered the weapon.

...

So, so cruel...

I grabbed the first aid kit and opened it right there. I could still feel blood seeping from my wound, and though I didn't pause to look at myself in the mirror, I knew that half my face must already be stained red.

I no longer pointed the weapon at the woman, but I hadn't tucked it away either. Using my free hand, I rifled through the small box, which, I have to admit, was quite well-equipped. I turned on the faucet, and a stream of slightly brown water stained the white sink. It wasn't ideal, but it would do.

". . ."

Neither of us spoke a single word as I treated my wound.

A perfectly vertical cut that ran from my scalp down to just past the middle of my right eyebrow. The only scar I have on my face.

Once the bleeding was stopped, I covered the wound with a gauze pad and secured it with medical tape.

"A-ah..."

The gunfire had ceased. I never found

out what happened in that battle, nor who had attacked us. I sighed, feeling safe and whole again. I placed a hand on my face, and beyond the sting of accidentally touching my wound, a deep sense of discouragement consumed me from the inside.

How close I had been to death. Alone, with no help, no one shouting my name or offering me support. Was this going to be my life from now on? Would I have to go through this kind of stress all the time? Impossible. My limbs felt like they were made of wet clay, my breathing was out of sync with my thoughts, and when I lifted my face, I saw furtive tears trying to escape from between my eyelids. I squeezed my eyes shut and wiped them away with my wrist.

Without turning to look at the girl still sitting in the bathtub, I spoke to her.

"... I'm sorry. I was rough... because I was scared. I'll repay you with food."

I was forced to turn my head when I felt two weak hands pulling at my 92.

It didn't even count as a struggle. The strength of one of my arms was more than enough to prevent the woman, who had been terrified and cornered moments before, from taking the weapon. Her bony fingers clutched both the slide of the pistol and a small portion of the grip, pulling it toward her body with no care or thought.

"Wait! Don't do that, let go! I'm not going to hurt you!"

But she didn't respond. She only let out screams and guttural noises from the strain she was exerting.

"Listen to me, I've got what I wanted. I'll leave you food and go, that's all."

It was no use. She tried to scratch my arm, but my coat was thick enough to barely let me feel the sting of her nails. She pulled harder, again and again.

I hesitated.

The barrel of the gun was mere inches from her chest. I only needed to move my finger slightly, and the problem would be over right then and there. But I didn't want that anymore. I'd had enough, at least for the night. Besides, considering what I had already put this woman through, I didn't want to... I had already done enough wrong for one night in the name of survival.

"Let go! Can't you hear me?!"

That same hand on my arm dropped like a hook around my neck, scratching me superficially but clearly aiming to do much greater damage. She wasn't leaving me any options. I tried to find a less violent solution. I grabbed the hand attacking me with my free hand and exerted all the force I could with my other hand, trying to lower the barrel, maybe fire a shot into the ground to scare her off.

But she; it was her who wouldn't let me.

Probably with the last of her strength, she lunged at me just as I pulled the trigger.

A scream reverberated through that tiny bathroom. The last of the woman's strength faded, and the next thing I saw was that Italian woman slumped against the bathtub, clutching her side with nothing but panic on her face, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. She didn't even look at me anymore. It was as if I didn't exist.

I looked at the gun in my hand.

I took a step back, opened the door, and ran.

I didn't stop until the sun burned my skin, and the landscape had completely changed.

. . .

April, 2031

I didn't even get to read an eighth of the book before Angelique fell asleep against my chest. I placed the book on the bedside

table and laid my hands gently on her shoulders.

"Go back to your room, Angel. We can continue the story tomorrow."

"Hm..."

She lazily opened her eyes and looked up at me, meeting my gaze for a few seconds before closing them again and settling more firmly against my chest, shifting her body slightly to fit more comfortably in the space between my legs.

"This is fine..."

She spoke in a tone so calm that even the wind outside, if there had been any, seemed to pause.

I placed a hand on her head and ran my fingers through her raven-black hair. I intertwined them with the strands, playing a little with the tips.

I leaned just slightly over the table and

blew out the candle, extinguishing the flame and plunging us into darkness that was anything but unwelcome.

. . .

Yes...

In moments like these, I conclude that everything was worth it.

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